



Slave labor, overcrowding, and unmarked graves – the buried history of Atlanta city prison farm from the 1950s to 1990s shows it's no place of honor.

The official histories of the Atlanta Prison Farm paint a rosy picture of “respect,” “trust,” “reform,” and “the dignity of work.” But digging deeper reveals a much darker history that the City has not yet reckoned with. And it's about to be sold and bulldozed by the same government institutions who caused the untold suffering hidden under the site's surface.



A brief history of the
Atlanta City Prison Farm

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Muscogee land-

By Lily Ponitz

8,000 BC – 1,000 BC

The property is on naturally resource-rich land in the South River watershed, a headwaters of the Ocmulgee/Altamaha river system, one of the three largest river basins on the Atlantic Seaboard.

Archeologists have collected evidence of an unbroken chain of civilization in the Ocmulgee River Basin dating back to the Ice Age migration of humans across North America.

The South River is the northernmost boundary of Soapstone Ridge. Soapstone Ridge is the largest intrusion of mafic-ultramafic rock¹, a type of igneous rock formed through the cooling and solidification of magma or lava, present in North Georgia. This geological phenomena has educational importance, both in understanding the creation of Earth's current land surface and the existence of this region's earliest human settlements.

Extensive archeological surveys conducted by GSU in the 1980's found habitation sites dating back tens of thousands of years. At these sites, people lived, harvested soapstone, and worked the stone into bowls and tools.²

Evidence of quarrying and bowl making exists today on sides of boulders. Production of soapstone bowls, mostly for cooking, was likely a focus of economic activity.³

Some unique plants still exist on Soapstone Ridge today, which only grow on soils derived from mafic rocks. The forests of the ridge support rare species such as the barn owl and bobcat, and creeks deriving from the natural springs support mollusks.⁴

1,000 BC – 1825 AD

The Muscogee (Creek) people are descendants of peoples that spanned the entire region known today as the Southeastern United States.⁵

The historic Muscogee, known as Mound builders, built expansive towns within the broad river valleys in the present states of Alabama, Georgia, Florida and South Carolina.⁶

The Muscogee were a union of several tribes that evolved into a dynamic confederacy which grew in town-units through population growth, conquering, and taking in tribes and fragments devastated by the European imperial powers.⁷

In the 1600's, the English began trading in Muscogee territory, and in 1733 they established the Georgia Colony along the banks of the Savannah River.⁸

The English called the Muscogee peoples Creeks, designating the peoples occupying the towns on the Coosa and the Tallapoosa rivers, Upper Creeks, and those to the southeast, on the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers, the Lower Creeks.⁹

During the Revolutionary War, despite conflict with the English and many Muscogees wanting to remain neutral, the Muscogee Nation formed an alliance with England.¹⁰

In 1783, after losing the Revolutionary War, the English ceded Muscogee territory to the new country. New waves of American settlers poured in, many coveting the rich river bottomlands possessed by the Muscogee.

In 1783, the state of Georgia negotiated an illegal treaty at Augusta taking Muscogee lands from the Ogeechee to the Oconee River.¹¹

In 1805, in the first Treaty of Washington, the Muscogee allowed the government to widen one of the confederacy's successful trading trails into a Federal Road. This road became a major thoroughfare for the migration of settlers.¹²

Under pressure from the government and hostility from settler neighbors, internal conflict arose among the Muscogees, as well as nearby Choctaws and Cherokees. Some sided with more northern Shawnee leaders in resisting assimilating and giving up more land.¹³

In 1813, war broke out between this coalition of resisters and the loyalists, backed by General Andrew Jackson, and lasted until a Georgia militia, together with federal troops, destroyed a stronghold at Horseshoe Bend on the Tallapoosa River in Alabama. This violent attack killed many in the resistance and convinced Muscogee towns to side with Jackson.¹⁴

As punishment for their resistance, in 1814, America took a significant portion of land from the Muscogee territory, 23-million acres, including

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southern Georgia bordering Florida.¹⁵

In 1821, in the First Treaty of Indian Springs, William McIntosh ceded Muscogee lands between the Ocmulgee River and the Flint River to America without having recognized authority by the Muscogee nation to do so. This treaty, which was later nullified, turned over the land Dekalb County was founded on in 1822.¹⁶

William McIntosh went on to sign the 1825 Treaties of Indian Springs that ceded all land east of the Chattahoochee River to Georgia and Alabama and agreed to the confederacy’s relocation west of the Mississippi River. As a result of his actions signing these illegal treaties, McIntosh became the first Creek to be executed for crimes against the nation.¹⁷

Time as a prison farm to present-

Note: This is a working document with information added to it as more history is uncovered.

Introduction

Run as a city prison farm uninterrupted from 1922¹⁸ to somewhere around 1990¹⁹.

Often erroneously referred to as the “Honor Farm” (honor farm is actually federal penitentiary #2). Any report that refers to it as the “Honor Farm” will be incorrect and have conflicting combined information from 2-3 different prison farms.²⁰

Multiple documented counts of rape, beatings, overcrowding, “slave conditions,” lack of healthcare, various strikes, and deaths (disproportionately Black victims).²¹

1800s-1920s

1827- George W. Key acquires land (that would become the Prison Farm) via land lottery

NAME	George Key
COUNTY	Muscogee
CAPTAIN’S DISTRICT	Bells
NUMBER	215
DISTRICT	17
LOTTERY DATE	1827
SOURCE	REPRINT of OFFICIAL REGISTER of LAND LOTTERY OF GEORGIA 1827; 19th DAY’S DRAWING- March 28.ELBERT. page 56

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90 Federal prison farm to have 1,250 acres. Fine bottom land in DeKalb county bought by

Atlanta Constitution

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- 33 County Residents Protest Prison's Farm Expansion. (1939, November 14) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
- 34 Officials To Study Revision Of City Prension Set-up (1939, November 21) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
- 35 No title (1940, February 28) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
- 36 Prison farm's "time off" plan is getting results, Gibson says (1940, April 1) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
- 37 Work on new prison project halted by court. (1940, November 24) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
- 38 Group to urge protection of new building, \$25,000 investment in unfinished prison structure. (1941, June 22) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
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- 58 Jury Raps Prison Crowding. (1960, October 29) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
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1911- City purchases the land from William Bibb Key, son of George W. Key.²²

1917- City purchases established dairy and farm "Maddox farm" (who had been renting the land from the City).²³

Municipal dairy established by Atlanta city council.²⁴

1918- Superintendent of prisons T.B. Lanford inexplicably put in control of the municipal dairy farm, by the finance committee, removing City Bacteriologist Claude Smith.²⁵

Lanford was investigated for whipping incarcerated women while they were tied to the "bucking chair" causing city council to to pass a law banning whipping to be replaced with solitary confinement.²⁶

1920- The Atlanta stockade (located at 760 Glenwood Ave, today an apartment complex) is overcrowded, a suggestion to move it to the city municipal dairy farm is proposed.²⁷

1922- It was illegal to build prison facilities outside of city limits, city council passes a bill making it legal to build city prison facilities outside of the city/county.²⁸

1922- Key Road municipal dairy farm became the Atlanta City Prison and Dairy Farm, later simplified to the Atlanta City Prison Farm. Originally suggested as a place to put all female city prisoners. Unclear when male prisoners started being sent there a 1936 article states "The prison farm where all female prisoners are sent, as well as white male prisoners..."²⁹

1930s

1933- Maude (zoo elephant) buried at Prison Farm.³⁰

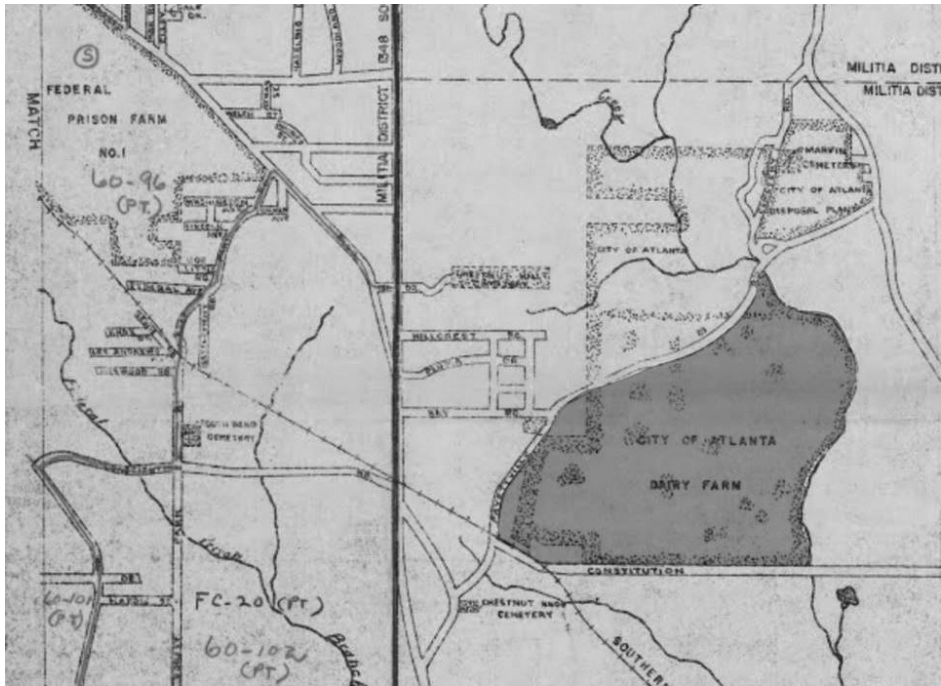
1938- New wing completed at the prison farm houses 75 persons. Another addition – is expected to be the same size.³¹

1938- H.H. Gibson is elected general manager of the Atlanta Prison Farm.

This move comes after an investigating committee "had termed conditions at the city prison "an ungodly mess".³²

1939- City council proposes extending the farm by 184 acres on Constitution Ave. to Boulder Crest Dr. Residents of DeKalb county's Mills District emphatically opposed the proposal due to racism aka- proximity of Black incarcerated men to their (white) school and predominantly white neighborhood.³³

A compromise was presented to buy only 134 acres and leave a 50-acre stretch as a buffer between the farm boundary and the school.³⁴



1940s

1940- Construction of a new prison building. “Additions will provide facilities for about 600 prisoners in the main wings and the old white men’s prions quarters will be converted in a hospital ward with disabled prisoners quartere in the present white and negro women’s wings.”³⁵

1940- For over a year superintendent Gibson has been “rewarding ‘workers’ and those with exemplary conduct with days off their sentences” with farmworkers (both men and women) receiving extra credit for each hour of overtime worked.³⁶

1940- Work halted on prison expansion due to no permit being issued for work under a 1938 law which requires that building permits must be obtained for all construction in DeKalb county, and the prison farm being too close to the (white) DeKalb school.³⁷

1941- DeKalb county residents obtain an injunction against the city for dumping untreated sewage (from the prison farm) into Intrenchment creek causing work on the new building to be abandoned.³⁸

Endnotes

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- 2 Dickens, R. S. and Carneg, L. R., Preliminary Site Investigations at Soapstone Ridge, DeKalb County, Georgia. Georgia State University.
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- 29 Report Atlanta Police Dept. (1936, May 2) *The Atlanta Constitution*.
- 30 New Queen Coco, In First Interview Urges Increase in Peanut-Growing. (1993, October 26) *The*

subject. She then conducts qualitative interviews with local community members and family members of those affected. She stresses that this qualitative information is not to be written off just because it does not align with records that state institutions consider to be legitimate. And finally, she lays out a method for field research including site reconnaissance, field walking and probing, site preparation, controlled burns, mapping, aerial photography, soil profile, metal detector survey, ground penetrating radar, and ground conductivity surveys, all checked against controls to ensure that they align with the results of the same methods on previously known unmarked grave sites. Crucially, this is all done with the consent of the relevant communities, and is done unobtrusively so as not to disturb the graves.

We also want to stress that throughout much of our archival research, the bulk of the articles we were able to find were from the Atlanta Journal, Atlanta Constitution, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution after the two merged. Though these papers often reported on bad conditions once they had become public, and in two cases were responsible for investigative work that made these conditions public, these white-run papers have a known history of racism and support for police, state, and carceral institutions. We therefore believe that a thorough search through archives of Black-run newspapers, such as the Atlanta Daily World, magazines, and other publications is necessary to gain a more complete understanding of the history. We the authors of this piece are furthermore white, and so we believe it is possible that our own biases and blind spots could be present in our reporting. We strongly believe that a better accounting of this history could be undertaken by people who have been more directly affected and hope that this piece is not taken as an end, but a beginning, and an invitation to further scrutiny.

Acknowledgments

It's Going Down, Defend the Atlanta Forest, Morna Gerrard, Joshua D. Hogan, Victoria Lemos, Serena McCracken, C. R. Reynolds, Mariam Asad, ATL Comms Collective, PJ Avery-Muñoz, Jeff T.



1941- Fulton county grand jury opposes proposal to abandon new partially built building stating “this prison farm is a fundamental necessity from humane as well as an economic standpoint “. ³⁹

New building (that had been halted) is opened “can house 725 prisoners without crowding them”. ⁴⁰

One of the older prison buildings (abandoned for new building) is converted into the first city hospital for people with venereal diseases. ^{41,42}

1944- Prison farm expanded by renting 88 adjoining acres. ⁴³

1946- Prison farm expanded, City purchases 89 adjoining acres. ⁴⁴ (unclear if this is the land that was being rented in 1944)

1947- Prison is racially integrated (both men and women). ⁴⁵

1950s

1950- Coco (zoo elephant) buried at the Prison Farm. ⁴⁶

1952- “cost of living raise” for prison labor from 50¢ to \$1.00 a day. ⁴⁷

1952- Sentences are reduced to alleviate overcrowding e.g. 10 days instead of 20 days for drunkenness. ⁴⁸

1957- In an attempt to curb a flu epidemic, Judge Arnold orders Superintendent H. H. Gibson to turn the prisoners loose, and then sterilize the prison.⁴⁹

Only those with “light infractions”, “older men”, and those with tuberculosis were released, with the stipulation they had a home to go back to.⁵⁰

Investigation is agreed to by the chairman of the Aldermanic Board’s Prison committee to investigate charges for “guards directly abusing their authority over Negro women inmates”, “alleged discrimination in work assignments” “alleged lack of adequate supervision”.⁵¹ (Unclear on conclusion of investigation)

The Prison Farm has been “under the observation of the Negro community for some time because...alleged brutality, poor treatment of prisoners and molesting of women inmates.”⁵² (Unclear on outcome of investigation)

1958- Grand jury recommends the city of Atlanta expand to address overcrowding, properly staff prison medical facilities, and have medicine dispensed by a doctor or a registered nurse.⁵³⁵⁴

A second grand jury that year finds fault with the Prison Farm medical facility.⁵⁵

1958- Flash fire burns down a warehouse and damages a prison guard house along with an additional warehouse.⁵⁶ (No mention of those incarcerated being injured)

1958- “Better medical and fire protection facilities have been provided.” “Nevertheless, there is still room for improvements, especially in the rehabilitation of alcoholics.”⁵⁷

1960s

1960- Fulton county grand jury finds Prison Farm “exceedingly overcrowded”.⁵⁸

Grand jury suggests building a “work camp” to alleviate crowding.

Finds restrooms and kitchen “in a deplorable state”.

Willie-B the first (zoo gorilla) buried at Prison Farm.⁵⁹

1965- AJC reporter Dick Herbert goes undercover by pretending to be drunk to get arrested and sentenced to the prison farm to report on conditions at the Prison Farm.⁶⁰

These reports draw public attention and Superintendent Hulsey addresses concerns through a “get tough” policy to curtail contraband sales and smuggling, as well as propaganda on why the solitary confinement cell known as “the hole” is “necessary”, and

modern era, despite claims at each stage that the bad times were behind us and a new era lay ahead. We will be discussing these claims of reform, and the contributions of local newspapers to the positive image of the institutions in question, more fully in a later piece. But for now, we feel it is prudent to take the Atlanta Police Foundations claims that the new training facility on Key Road will allow us to “reimagine policing” with a grain of salt.

We have documented a history of the city prioritizing its ability to cut costs with prison labor, essentially extending slavery. We have seen physical and emotional abuse, torture, overwork, a lack of healthcare, poor sanitation, overcrowding, and poor nutrition, ranging throughout the entire history of the site. We have seen nearly every stage of leadership get caught breaking rules and laws while avoiding the same carceral fate as the prisoners, as well as a reluctance by city officials to enact policies that would truly alleviate these harms and attempt to make up for them, rather ensuring that power remains continuous. We have seen the Atlanta city government run over the rights of the residents of Dekalb County, who are disenfranchised from the city, time and again, and we see it continue today. And we have seen that this story has still not been told by anyone but those in power and those who support power.

We have heard folk stories of unmarked graves from the community, and given the rest of what we’ve uncovered, we believe these reports are not unlikely and need to be taken seriously and investigated fully before a lease is signed and any work is done on the land. Otherwise the city risks not only erasing the history of the lives it has destroyed, but desecrating their graves in the process. If the land is signed away and unmarked graves are found after the fact, it would not only cause immense pain and harm to the people of the city, but it would also be politically devastating for all who signed off, if history is any indication. But even if these stories are unable to be substantiated completely, the history of suffering laid out here well more than demands a full investigation of its own. The City of Atlanta, as an institution, is responsible for untold violence and harm, for which it must take real responsibility and provide material reparations to the populations affected. This is no place of honor.

Further Research

Kathrine Nichols lays out a robust process for unobtrusively examining such possibilities while respecting the communities affected. Her process involves thorough archival research, including the use of unconfirmed local knowledge to generate ledes for deeper investigation. This archival research is then situated alongside the currently existing literature on the

worked on the land once used as a sugar plantation.” An article from the Tyler Morning Telegraph describes a life of physical abuse, forced labor, and poor nutrition, much like the prison farm in Atlanta. Similarly to Atlanta, “it wasn’t until it became clear that these abuses were widespread and affecting white prisoners that public opinion started to shift.”¹⁷⁷ In Arkansas in 1968, a reformist superintendent of Cummins prison farm discovered the remains of three former prisoners. His discovery “made international news, embarrassed Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller, and infuriated conservative politicians. It also led to Murton’s firing and banishment from the field of prison management.”¹⁷⁸

Finally, although the Brandon Indian Residential School was not a prison farm, our archival research determined that conditions for the prisoners held at the Atlanta prison farm were not dissimilar from the conditions of the children held at BIRS. Lacking healthcare, poor sanitation and ventilation, malnutrition, violence and abuse, a heavy workload, accidents, and harsh punishments all contributed to the deaths there¹⁷⁹, and each of those factors have been demonstrated throughout this piece to have existed on the prison farm.

Conclusion

As we mentioned at the top, this is not an exhaustive or comprehensive history. We felt a sense of urgency to compile as much information about the site as we could before the Atlanta City Council’s full vote on the subject because we believe that once the lease is signed, our chances of fully documenting this history are potentially lost forever. There is a lot that we turned up late in our research that we were unable to include in this piece for the sake of time, but which we intend to write about in the future. We also know there is a lot out there that we were not able to find within our very rushed timeframe, but which we believe should be further investigated and compiled.

However, what we’ve laid out here already changes our fundamental understanding of the Atlanta prison farm. Far from a federal program ending in the 60s before being essentially abandoned, we saw that the Atlanta prison farm on Key road was City-run from the very beginning, and the direct continuation of the already cruel stockade. It was run continuously from the early 1920s to the late 1980s, contrary to prior belief. It was a completely different property than the Honor Farm, despite many, including the Atlanta Police Foundation, continuing to use that phrase when referring to the site.

At the City-run prison farm, atrocious conditions persisted across the better part of a century and ongoing into what we would consider the

various ways to address overcrowding.⁶¹

1967- A January federal court order requires desegregation of entire facility.⁶² (Unclear as to when it was re-segregated from 1947)

1967- Stokely Carmichael arrested/convicted of loitering and held at the Prison Farm (released on the same day).⁶³

1968- From Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s funeral parade- “After a funeral service at his own Ebenezer Baptist church, the draped coffin was placed on a farm wagon drawn by two mules from the Atlanta city prison farm”.⁶⁴

1970s

1973- Captain J.D. Hudson first Black man to be appointed head of the Prison Farm.⁶⁵

1977- Lawsuit against the City over the death from an incarcerated person at the farm from pesticide two years earlier.⁶⁶

1973- vegetables are no longer grown at the farm.⁶⁷

1980s-1990s

1982- Pork and beef is still being raised, comprising 42% of meat eaten by prisoners at the farm and the city jail.⁶⁸

1982-1983- Uniform Alcoholism Treatment Act (UATA) passed by the 1974 General Assembly effectively decriminalizing public drunkenness, prison population more than halves.^{69,70}

1985- City officials have agree to pay \$19,500 in legal fees and a \$4,500 settlement to three former Atlanta Prison farm inmates represented by the ACLU who filed legal complaints about conditions there.⁷¹

1987- The City was in the process of awarding a contract for 20 solitary confinement cells, however the firm was found to be attempting to win contracts for minority company by creating minority front.⁷²

1989- Farm production accounts for only 20% of prisoner food.⁷³

1990- Farm animals and equipment are auctioned off. Citing “Not enough inmates are skilled at slaughtering and butchering” with those who worked the farm program “reassigned to other jobs like housekeeping and janitorial work.”⁷⁴

1990- AJC article Mentions APD training facility in trailers at a condemned site on Key Rd. It is unclear where APD’s training facility was beforehand – more research is needed.⁷⁵

1991- A public notice is issued to discuss the future plans for the Key

Road Prison Farm Property (and the City of Atlanta solid waste disposal).⁷⁶

Two more of the same public notices are issued this year.^{77,78}

1995- Atlanta City Detention Center is opened in preparation for the 1996 Summer Olympics.

1996- Mayor Bill Campbell rejects idea that the Prison Farm be used as housing for houseless people, stating “There’s already enough housing available”.⁷⁹

2000s-Present

2002- Possibility that the Prison Farm be turned into a public park.⁸⁰

2017- Earliest found depiction of cop city proposal at the Prison Farm.⁸¹

2021- Ordinance 21-O-0367, (allowing the City to lease the land to the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) so the APF can build cop city) introduced by Joyce Sheperd on 6/7/21.⁸²

Ordinance 21-O-0367 adopted 9/7/21.⁸³

Special thanks to: Lily Ponitz, Victoria Lemos, Morna Gerrard, & Serena McCracken

He can’t save my life out there.” This was three years after superintendent Hulsey was praised for his reforms and interviewed by the AJC, saying “I’m just trying to make this place sanitary and livable for these people.”¹⁷⁰

In two occasions in 1969, the vast majority of prisoners went on strike due to poor food. The first time they demanded a raise for the cook and the hiring of a new cook. But by four months later, these conditions, which were agreed to to end the strike, had still not been met. Prison farm administrators once again promised to raise cook wages and hire a new cook to end the strike, but we have no indication that they followed through¹⁷¹.

An AJC article from 1970 states that prisoners were working in the kitchen while infected with tuberculosis. “One man was sent to Battey State Hospital after it was found his tuberculosis was so advanced he started hemorrhaging. He had worked in the kitchen the night before.” When asked about this, prison farm administrator R.F. Jordan said that some prisoners do have TB, and “yes, some work in the kitchen, but only if their case is arrested.” Employees protesting discrimination against Black employees at the farm and unfair and illegal incarceration of alcoholics also said that “there are rats and roaches and filth you wouldn’t believe.”¹⁷² In 1971, the prison farm was found to be serving food illegally without a license, but health officials complained that there were only two of them for the entire multi-county district and they had no means of actually enforcing licenses or food safety¹⁷³. Just one month later, prisoners again went on strike due to watered down gravy and being unjustly incarcerated for alcoholism¹⁷⁴.

Reports on conditions are few and far between after this period, but a 1982 ACLU lawsuit claimed, among other things, that “conditions in the facility are unsanitary.” We suspect there is more to find between these years, though, as one prison farm worker said “we used to have strikes out here about every month, sometimes two or three times a month.”¹⁷⁵ In 1983, superintendent Hudson, once hailed as the great humanitarian reformer, was replaced after “complaints from employees and city politicians about his handling of the city jail, its employees and prisoners.” Hudson said of this criticism, “I get bored when there aren’t any problems. Serenity is not my thing.”¹⁷⁶

Similar Cases

There have been several other instances where institutions with similar conditions were later found to have unmarked graves, burial grounds, or other human remains. Human remains in Sugar Land, Texas near the old Imperial Prison Farm there were found to have “belonged to prisoners who

Overcrowding of jails remains a problem in our modern jails and prisons. Currently, Fulton County Sheriff Labat wants the Atlanta city government to abandon their promise of closing a city jail and instead rent the jail to Fulton to alleviate overcrowding in their system. This is billed as a humanitarian move, but history suggests otherwise.

Sanitation and Malnutrition

Complaints about poor sanitation and bad food also span the prison farm's history. Combined with the previously detailed conditions, these would further increase the likelihood of sickness and death within the prison farm walls.

Prisoners in 1938 complained that “a silver dollar would cover each particle of food given to prisoners,” and asked for “more vegetables and less sorghum.”¹⁶⁵ In 1941, during a tense meeting in which Dekalb tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent Atlanta from expanding the farm, a Dekalb representative said that the farm was “without sanitary facilities,” despite frequent assurances that the facility was clean; however, work was temporarily abandoned on that expansion after Dekalb county citizens sought and obtained an injunction against the city for dumping untreated sewage into Intrenchment Creek¹⁶⁶.

There is a large gap in reporting on these particular conditions, but we suspect they persisted, because in 1960 the Dekalb grand jury found that “restrooms were deplorable in both white and Negro wards,” and that the kitchen floor was in “a deplorable state” and should be replaced.¹⁶⁷ The AJC's own inspection curiously concluded that the farm was “operated very efficiently with good sanitary conditions,”¹⁶⁸ but just two years later, Dick Herbert's undercover work as a prisoner showed quite the contrary. He found puddles of spit at drainage grills, wondered if many of the men had tuberculosis, and said that “it was not uncommon to find dead bugs or hair in food. The rusty, dirty tins we drank out of should be replaced.” “The food was “almost entirely a thin and liquid diet,” according to Herbert, and inmates often complained that “the best of the farm's produce and meats are reserved for the guards and hired help.”¹⁶⁹

A prisoner named Carl H., sent to the farm in 1968 on public drunkenness charges, said after five days at the facility, “I've had one half of one meal since I been there.” Apparently by this time local court rulings had determined that chronic alcoholics could no longer be arrested on these charges, but the judge claimed “I'm doing it from a humanitarian standpoint, whether it's legal or not.” Carl said of the matter, “He told me he was gonna save my life. I told him he can't save my life out there at the stockade... I told him he can send me anywhere, but not the stockade.

A Brief History of the Atlanta Prison Farm

A proposed police and fire training facility on the site of the old Atlanta Prison Farm at 561 Key Road has raised concerns among citizens about environmental racism, police violence, and land stewardship in the era of climate change. But it also raises questions about the history of the Prison Farm itself. The most often-cited histories suggest that the land was the site of a federal prison farm that was later taken over by the city and soon abandoned.

But archival research into the Key Road site reveals that not only was it never run federally, it was run as a city prison farm uninterrupted from about 1920 to nearly 1990, and doing considerable harm to those it incarcerated throughout, despite claims of reform at every stage. Newspaper articles, letters from nurses, legislative and inspection records, and folk stories tell tales of overcrowding, “slave conditions,” lack of healthcare, labor strikes, deaths, and unmarked “pauper's” graves.

And this barely scratches the surface. Throughout our research we were surprised in two conflicting directions: one, that there was so much available historical documentation that seemingly few had dug into and put together correctly; and two, that there was so much missing entirely — records that were missing, destroyed, misfiled, or possibly were never kept in the first place. We are a group of citizen researchers with very limited time and resources who pulled at one question and found hundreds more. This piece is meant to be a brief introduction, a survey of

the possible directions for further research. We strongly believe that a full investigation into the history of this land and many of its current physical attributes is needed before any further development or leasing takes place. Kathryn Nichols already laid the groundwork for such research in her 2015 thesis on the unmarked graves and burial grounds of the Brandon Indian Residential School and the history of what took place during operation: a three-pronged approach including archival research, field research, and qualitative interviews with affected members of the community. However, this would take time, and the Atlanta Police Foundation along with several members of Atlanta City Council want to complete the deal by Labor Day of 2021, signing over control to the very institutions that caused so much harm and potentially bulldozing that history forever. The people of Atlanta deserve answers.

History as a Solid

We feel the strong need to insist on our usage of the word “history” as something more than an abstract narrative. It is flesh and blood, the tales and songs of joy and sorrow and pain told by the people who lived it, and not just the numerical recordkeeping of the structures that caused ongoing suffering which still benefit from this abstraction. It is common to argue for preserving history for its own sake, which certainly is useful and laudable. We want to argue for preservation on the basis of its material effects on the people of the past and the present, and to demonstrate the direct continuity of control of these structures over the people they affect, and the repeating patterns of rhetoric used to justify it.

As such, as Nichols also points out in her thesis, it is necessary to situate these records in their full, living context. While a full consideration of this context could take up several books and is outside the scope of this piece, we do want to point out that this period (1920s-present) has seen an unceasing trend of the criminalization of Black, Indigenous, poor, disabled, and mentally ill people (among so many other marginalities) that is visible throughout the story told here and on into the present. We also see a story, still ongoing, that shows a preference on the part of powerful institutions toward what Lauren Berlant calls “slow death”: intentionally and repeatedly subjecting people to events and conditions known to contribute to suffering and early death of those deemed less valuable by capital interests, sometimes even at their own expense, other times for the sake of profit, rather than investing in the idea that all humans are valuable and worth taking care of through things like housing and healthcare.

A swastika is found drawn in one of the bedrooms⁸⁴. White inmates go on strike shortly after the prison farm is integrated⁸⁵. Stokely Carmichael is

with a “compromise”: they would instead only take 134 acres, and leave a 50 acre “buffer” between the prison farm and the school¹⁵⁴. In 1944, a new building originally slated to be a medical ward was built. As we saw in the healthcare section, this ended up becoming a new prison building, and the old building became the VD hospital. The new building could “house 725 prisoners without crowding them” and was said to be able to “eliminate long standing criticism of nearby residents because of escapes from the old, overcrowded, and ill-arranged structure.”¹⁵⁵ In 1946, the city took possession of a further 89 acres of land for the prison farm¹⁵⁶.

Overcrowding was again raised as an issue in 1952, but this time certain sentences were reduced from 20 days to 10 days to address it, constituting the first time a decarceral approach was used, as far as we found¹⁵⁷. But despite this and yet another new wing being built in 1958¹⁵⁸, a grand jury in 1960 found that the prison farm was “exceedingly overcrowded” and “as a result, the health of prisoners is ‘jeopardized.’” They suggested building a “work camp” to alleviate crowding¹⁵⁹. Dick Herbert’s undercover investigation in 1965 found that men were sleeping on the floor and tables because there were still not enough beds. “So closely packed are the 300 bunks that they alternated, head to foot,” he went on¹⁶⁰.

In 1967, Atlanta finally started talking about chronic alcoholism as a health problem rather than one of criminality. However, the assumption was that this would still be “treated” by those in charge of the prisons. “The prison is already crowded up against its 600 person capacity,” said the AJC. But according to superintendent Hulsey, the conversion to a rehabilitation center would mean longer stays and thus higher populations, stating “they likely will have to build a whole new city prison farm”.¹⁶¹ A 1976 article from the AJC says that in 1970, “a thousand prisoners were packed in the old building ... inmates slept in rickety bunks three high. Health inspectors and judges cut the population for humanity’s sake.” It further claimed that the facility was now “well below its comfortable capacity of 400 prisoners.”¹⁶²

In 1974, the Uniform Alcohol Treatment Act was passed (though never fully funded), which effectively decriminalized alcoholism. This act was said to have reduced the population of the prison farm from 500 in 1972 to 200 in 1983¹⁶³. Although new laws were passed further criminalizing certain actions while intoxicated at the behest of the business community who “demanded drunks and winos be removed from the streets,”¹⁶⁴ this is the last we found of complaints of overcrowding. The lack of further complaints strongly suggests that decriminalization is a better answer to the problem than expansion. It is also worth mentioning that alleviating the problem 50 years into the project does not make up for the unnecessary harm and death likely caused by these conditions over the years.

the first place. Overcrowding is a common occurrence in prisons and jails throughout the country. A longitudinal study by the Vera Institute of Justice found that “as jail populations have exceeded capacity, county policy makers have turned to jail expansion rather than alternatives to incarceration...in some cases, decision makers also argue that replacing older facilities will provide safer living and working conditions for the increasing numbers of people in the jail.” However, Institute researchers note,

“larger jails built to accommodate an overcrowded population often see their populations continue to increase. This is because expansion alone fails to address the root causes of overcrowding, leaving in place the very policies and practices that drove the jail’s population increase in the first place. Indeed, there is a risk that the existence of a larger jail with more beds may reduce the incentive to make policy changes that address the factors driving overcrowding due to the temporary relief expansion provides.”¹⁴⁸

This is precisely what we see play out here, and in fact is still an ongoing issue in Atlanta area incarceration systems today.

As we already saw, overcrowding was one of the initial motivations for proposing to move the stockade to the dairy farm (though it was not the final decisive factor, as by that time populations were dwindling). Several years later, though, Councilman Chosewood was being praised for increasing the incarcerated population because it brought in more revenue. And several years after that, in 1929, overcrowding at the second stockade on Decatur and Hilliard prompted discussions of expanding the prison farm by bringing in portable buildings from the school board and expanding the women’s prison by 100ft¹⁴⁹.

A police report from 1936 says “we find that all prisoners have separate quarters which are in sanitary condition, but overcrowded. We recommend that another unit be constructed for white female prisoners as well as white male prisoners.”¹⁵⁰ By 1938, a new wing was completed housing 75 more prisoners, and another addition of the same size was expected to be added to the main building¹⁵¹. But only five months later, the prison farm’s own superintendent again described conditions there as “overcrowded” and recommended another expansion and separate ward for “diseased prisoners.”¹⁵²

In 1939, a proposal to extend the land by 184 acres was protested by Dekalb residents on the basis that it was directly next to a white school and that “further development of penal institutions in that section would destroy the value of surrounding property and preclude the development of a civic center which citizens seek near the West side school grounds.”¹⁵³ The plan was abandoned, but later brought back up

held at the farm for several days on the charges of “loitering” at the height of the civil rights era⁸⁶. After Martin Luther King’s assassination, donkeys from the prison farm pull his casket through town⁸⁷. Nurses beg for more tuberculosis tests for overcrowded prisoners. Homeless alcoholics are repeatedly cycled in and out of the system. All of these instances are similar to others both at the time and now, and reflect the racial and class dynamics at the heart of the carceral system in the first place.

The ongoing way these forces continue to shape our social landscape in Atlanta — the criminalizing of “water boys,” the impending eviction crisis, the lack of resources in the midst of a pandemic, the continued cycling of homeless people through the criminal system instead of providing housing, the squashing of anti-state protests but allowance of white supremacist and antivax protests — these all highlight the further need for this history to be told by the people it affects rather than the institutions responsible, which are already seeking to take hold of and control the narrative surrounding this piece of land and their own history. In the coming days and weeks, we will likely see attempts from these institutions (Atlanta Police Department, Atlanta Police Foundation, City Council, the Mayor’s office, the media organizations which support them, etc.) to pay lip-service to the atrocities of the past as quickly as possible before moving on to handing the keys right back to themselves. But as we’ll see, these vague gestures toward the harms of the past, without material accountability for the harm done, have been used throughout the prison farm’s history to justify continued control of physical and narrative space, and at each stage prove to be largely empty or, at best, nibbling around the margins.

A Brief Note on Ownership and Control

Before our story even begins, the area in question was a thriving trade hub for Native Americans throughout the continent⁸⁸. Every story that takes place in America is a story of genocide, colonialism, and broken treaties, and the unnatural division of interconnected land into individual parcels for “ownership.” This, too, needs to be reckoned with and fully reconciled before anything like true justice can be claimed. This part of the history, however, is outside the scope of our current study and should be investigated by more qualified people.

The most frequently cited history about this piece of land is “A Historical Analysis of The Atlanta Prison Farm” by Jillian Wootten of the City Planning department, written in 1999. In it, we are told that the Key Road property was purchased in 1918 by the Bureau of Prisons and the United States Federal Government. It was called the Honor Farm, and federal

prisoners grew crops and raised livestock to feed the population of the nearby Federal Penitentiary. The piece claims that the site operated until 1965, when it was purchased by the Atlanta City government and shut down soon after, at which point the history becomes “murky,” as a single report of a labor strike on the land seems to contradict the closing⁸⁹.

Our research found that this history actually conflates three different properties. Property Number 1, a prison farm on the property of the Federal Penitentiary (where the penitentiary still exists today). Another, property, Number 2, was a second prison farm on Panthersville Road that was purchased from farmers in 1920 and was used to supplement the production of the first federal prison farm⁹⁰. But the third property, and the one we’re most interested in here, is the one on Key Road in unincorporated Dekalb County. This one was only ever owned and operated by the City government and used to produce food for City prisons. It operated from 1920 to about 1989 before shutting down and being abandoned and used as a dumping ground for the city and other residents.



The Key Road property was originally a simple municipal dairy farm⁹¹. But accusations that the farm was losing the city money, coupled with ongoing scandals at the city stockade on Glenwood and Fair streets, opened debates within City government ranging from 1915 to 1920 about closing the old stockade and moving some or all of the prisoners to the municipal dairy farm^{92,93}. The stockade was overcrowded and unprofitable, and expanding it would cost too much money. Meanwhile the area it was in was developing quickly and “filling up with small property owners, and

Another proposal from Grady one month later suggests that rather than hiring a nurse specifically for the prison farm, they use a nurse in the Central Referral Office to act as a liaison with non-clinical personnel at each of the eight detention centers in the city and give recommendations over the phone. They note that this would save the prisons thousands of dollars¹⁴⁵.

A letter from Shirley Millwood, a nurse at Grady, from 1977 indicates that prisoners were still being transported to Grady for administration of medication, and that even that was often not done. Her patient was supposed to be brought in every day for medication, “but the jail personnel have not complied” with that. The patient had been experiencing chest pain and shortness of breath all afternoon, but was not brought in until 10:30pm. “I feel that this is negligent on their part and is certainly detrimental to our patients. If something happens to this patient, will the jail be liable for the problems that result from him not being properly medicated?”¹⁴⁶

An undated document entitled “Health Program — City of Atlanta Prison Farm,” pulled from the same archival collection as the other Grady records, does indicate that since 1971, a doctor is on site five days a week for one hour each day, and a nurse is on duty 24 hours a day. It states that wherever feasible, treatment should be done on the prison farm property, but lays out several procedures to follow for serious medical emergencies, usually involving transportation to Grady. However, it points out, “unattended heart attacks, poison or suicide ... OD cases and heroin withdrawal in jail frequently occur.” The report also says that, in the case of public intoxication, “minor medical skill and routine capacity in easing inter-personal tensions can reduce difficulty for arresting officers, reduce the arrests needed, and initiate more constructive routing than directly to jail.” The report points out that, in diabetic patients, their convulsions and the similar smell of their breath to acetone can lead to incorrect conclusions with permanent health effects. It also mentions that delirium tremens, a condition associated with withdrawal of alcohol and other substances, can “endanger an inmate’s life, and more than one has died.”¹⁴⁷

Overcrowding

Without proper healthcare or separation of sick and healthy prisoners, and in the midst of a decades-long tuberculosis epidemic, overcrowding would certainly be a major contributing factor to sickness and death in prison scenarios. Our research found that overcrowding was a recurring complaint throughout the over half-century of the prison farm’s existence, despite frequent expansions often motivated by the overcrowding in

later.¹³⁸ There is no mention of efforts to mitigate spread within the prison farm facility, and the fate of those who were forced to stay is unknown to us.

In December of 1957, the Dekalb County Grand Jury presented findings from an investigation that found the prison farm to be severely lacking in healthcare. They advised that “a building should be provided so that prisoners who are ill can be held aside from the ones who are not sick,” meaning that in the 20 years since this was first proposed, it had still not been implemented. They recommended that prisoners who are sick be given examinations and a record be kept of those prisoners, and that the prison farm “employ a proper nursing staff.” Their final recommendation was that “some sort of sick quarters be put into effect so that prisoners who are ill can be held aside from the ones who are not sick.”¹³⁹ The implication from these recommendations is, of course, that none of these practices were in place at the time of the investigation. In November of 1958, a second Dekalb Grand Jury “found fault with its medical facilities ... along with the lack of fire safeguards referred to in the presentments.”¹⁴⁰

Of course, thanks to Dick Herbert’s undercover investigation for the AJC, we know now that by 1965, nearly ten years later, medical treatment was still found to be “nonexistent.” And in 1967, a prisoner “with a record of hospitalization for tuberculosis and heart trouble collapsed and died.” Despite the order that medical records for sick patients be kept, “we had no record on his card that he’d ever gone to see the doctor.”¹⁴¹

Recorded minutes from a meeting of the Department of Prisons and the Farm indicate that they planned to hire a full-time registered nurse in 1972 to assist the on-site doctor. Other plans included tests for tuberculosis, pap tests for female prisoners, and basic height, weight, and blood tests. They also indicated that they were currently not providing vision, hearing, or dental¹⁴². An Atlanta Voice article from 1973 claims there are “new” improvements in this area with the “employment of a physician and two nurses, a detoxification program for alcoholics, health tests, and a humane approach to prisoner problems.”¹⁴³ But in 1976, we still see this being raised as a proposal. An inter-office communication at Grady Memorial Hospital states the need for “a nurse clinician to be hired by Grady and paid by the state under contract to provide screening and triage services on site ... and referral, when appropriate, to Grady.” One of them suggests entering this contract for the reasons that it “will generate \$125,000 in income,” “minimize public criticisms of inadequate health care for prisoners,” and that currently the prisoners “get only crisis-oriented emergency care.” A May 1976 Community Relations Commission Report indicates that many of the healthcare issues are caused by the reluctance of guards to respond to prisoner complaints and “brutality at Grady by Atlanta Police officers.”¹⁴⁴

the presence of the stockade is a hindrance to further development.” They proposed building a park, or a golf course, or a school, or all three on the land to cater to the new residents⁹⁴⁹⁵.

Meanwhile, the Superintendent of Prisons, T. B. Lanford, who had also inexplicably been put in control of the municipal dairy in 1918⁹⁶, was the subject of a 1920 Atlanta Constitution piece that examined Atlanta Humane Society claims of women stockade prisoners being tied to a chair known as the “bucking chair” and whipped with a strap for disobedience. He at first denied these claims, saying that white women at the stockade were never whipped to his knowledge, and “Negro women only seldom so.”⁹⁷

An investigation apparently disproved this, and he was ordered to stop the corporal punishment, which he argued was both good and necessary and should not be stopped because changing course would be an admission of having done something wrong. He argued that “work-shy” prisoners would need to be motivated somehow⁹⁸. So by the end of January 1920, Atlanta City Council passed a law banning whippings and offering a new form of punishment instead: “solitary confinement on a diet of bread and water.”⁹⁹

Complaints of the stockade losing money continued into April 1920, and T. B. Lanford suggested moving the whole operation to the dairy farm, which he also controlled. Conveniently, prohibition had started earlier that year, and so it was suggested that the city could save a lot of money by making the new influx of prisoners work the city dairy, which was also accused of losing money (though later this was proven to be false)¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹.

There was only one stopping block: it was not legal to build prison facilities on land outside the city limits, and the Key Road property was located in unincorporated Dekalb County despite being owned by the City. This was easily solved by City Council, who simply passed a bill making it legal to build city prison facilities on land outside the city, even outside of Fulton County. By November, the proposal to close the stockade and move the prisoners to the dairy farm was agreed upon, and from that point forward the Key Road municipal dairy farm became the Atlanta City Prison and Dairy Farm, later simplified to the Atlanta City Prison Farm¹⁰².

By 1925, council members were being praised for bringing in the “largest number of prisoners at any one time in the past ten years, saving the city \$20 a day on the cost of feeding prisoners and increasing dairy production by 250 gallons a week.”¹⁰³ It was a win-win-win for the new property owners, city government, and police. But it was a huge loss for the most vulnerable citizens of the city, and for the residents of the surrounding Dekalb County area who had no way of consenting to the deal.

The Elephant in the Room

One of the more pressing issues we want to address is the question of unmarked graves. There are persistent folk stories about these that might be tempting for some to write off as unfounded rumors. However, oral histories and qualitative interviews need to be taken seriously and considered alongside other forms of evidence. Some stories have already been substantiated, and for others, the evidence we've found so far certainly places them within the realm of possibility. This piece does not aim to prove that there are unmarked graves on the property up for lease. Rather, we wish to show that that is a strong possibility that needs to be investigated as fully as possible, regardless of how long it takes to do so properly.

According to an Atlanta Journal-Constitution piece from 1976, "Maud, the deceased elephant and 280 inmates rest in peace at the City of Atlanta prison farm."¹⁰⁴ We suspect this is actually a sick joke on AJC's part, as the rest of the article attempts to paint life at the prison farm as one of leisure and respite. However, there is a known burial ground off of Bouldercrest Road and Key Road that contains both marked and unmarked graves that was once owned and operated by the prison farm, according to local folk historian Scott Petersen. To be perfectly clear, this burial ground is not on the property that's up for lease; the tract of land that was originally the Prison Farm has been divided into many smaller pieces, and only one of those is currently being sought for lease by APF. However, what this tells us is that a) there is at least some truth to at least some of the folk histories, and b) the prison farm as a whole contained at least some unmarked graves, which leads us to believe the other claims are at least worth taking seriously.

During our archival research, we attempted to find death and burial records for inmates that died while incarcerated there. We know for certain that at least several deaths occurred. One man was sprayed with an insecticide, which the warden denies but which the attending nurse and those who sprayed the man corroborated¹⁰⁵. Samuel Baynes, a 36-year-old Black man, "dropped dead" shortly after a patrolman woke him up to get dressed¹⁰⁶. Mark Isiah Willingham died after "becoming sick"¹⁰⁷. Coroner's jury will probe death of prisoner; Brown urges full investigation. (1953, April 14). Atlanta Daily World.. Robert Reynolds, 49, Black man, died from head injuries prompting an investigation. In reference to Reynolds, Charlie Brown, 1953 mayoral candidate, declared "approximately 10 prisoners have died in the jail in the last four years 'under mysterious circumstances'"¹⁰⁸.

The ACLU and those supporting the suit hoped this lawsuit would push the city to make changes, but in 1987 the city tried to build 20 more solitary confinement cells at the prison farm. The project fell through only because the white contractors they tried to hire were caught taking job contracts slated for minority-run businesses by using a front.

Solitary confinement is still used as punishment in most prisons today, despite being found to fulfill all four elements of torture under international law¹²⁹.

"Nonexistent Medical Treatment"

When Dick Herbert went undercover for the AJC in 1965, one of his findings was "nonexistent medical treatment." He reported "tubercular, coughing, sickly men, waiting to die, society's discards, herded into an unwashed 'stockade' only to be turned out again without even a smattering of 'help.'"¹³⁰ This was the case from the early days, and remained the case long after.

Already by 1938, the prison farm was described by Mayor Hartsfield as "an ungodly mess" and was likely facing issues with communicable diseases, as evidenced by a call for "separate hospital wards for diseased prisoners."¹³¹ But it took City Council until 1941 to even "study a proposal to equip the new building nearing completion ... for a 500-bed emergency hospital."¹³² The completed building was still not furnished by 1943¹³³. In 1944, instead of making the new building into a health facility, they moved the prisoners into the new building and fitted the 20-year-old prison building out to be a "city detention hospital for treatment of those infected with venereal disease."¹³⁴ Rather than be used as a hospital ward for the prison farm, it was used to treat VD patients from throughout the city. This was expected to "meet demands for years to come,"¹³⁵ but by 1945, there were already calls to close the entire prison farm and convert the whole thing into a venereal disease quarantine clinic due to increasing load¹³⁶. Those calls were never adopted.

In 1957, an "Asian flu" outbreak prompted the immediate release of "any person who is ill, and who has a home to return to."¹³⁷ Even this was qualified, though. H. H. Gibson, heading the prison at the time, said that only some of those "who had been convicted of just light infractions" would be released. He also said that older men with a history of tuberculosis would be released due to the risk of their contracting pneumonia. But "none of the men who had temperatures of 101 or more were released," he said. "Some of these older men have no place to go, and if we released them with a possible case of flu and higher temperature, chances are we would find them dead in the woods or somewhere a day

continued to supervise the colored women inmates.” The same statement details a beating with a broom handle, charges that Black women were forced to farm in the rain while white women were allowed to stay inside and read newspapers, and calls for further investigation¹²³.

Since the banning of the “bucking chair,” solitary confinement in “the hole” was the official punishment for not working at the standards set by the prison guards and wardens. We know little about the conditions of the hole in the earlier years, but in 1965, a new administrator named Ralph Hulseby took over operations of the prison farm. A scathing report from journalist Dick Herbert, who went undercover as a prisoner, alleged, among many other things, that the hole was “where men were starved and degraded.” His report drew much negative attention to the conditions on the farm, the hole being one of them. At the time, Hulseby said he was “not happy with it as it is, but it’s necessary for discipline.” The hole was described as a 4×8 foot windowless room where troublesome inmates are kept in solitary confinement. “Furnishings now include a pail and two blankets — no bed, mattress, or plumbing.” Hulseby allegedly planned to fit such cells with an iron-lattice bunk and toilet facilities¹²⁴. We have no indication that this was ever followed through on.

J.D. Hudson, the superintendent of the prison farm in later years who was hyped by press as a humanitarian reformer, described previous conditions as “slave labor.” He bragged frequently of his intention to give prisoners “a measure of self-respect” so that they could “lead decent lives again. Upon being instated, he announced his intention to empty solitary confinement and forbid guards from hitting or abusing inmates (something which, we must point out, had been declared many times before). He said that inmates are “ridden with guilt about their lives, they want to be mistreated and abused, and they want to be denigrated as some sort of atonement for their sins.”¹²⁵

This might explain why the great reformer himself was still in charge when the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued the city in 1982 for conditions on the farm, citing “illegal and unconstitutional punishments such as leg irons and excessive time in solitary confinement,” along with unsanitary conditions. Mayor Andrew Young said of the suit, “it’s simply a problem the city hasn’t gotten around to handling yet.”¹²⁶ At that point, “the hole” was in use as a solitary confinement cell (or cells), “a room seven feet long by four feet wide that is virtually without heat in the winter and without cooling in the summer.” Prisoners were held there 23 hours a day with an hour out for baths, often for many days at a time¹²⁷. The suit was settled in 1985 with a \$4500 settlement split between the three former prisoners. The city never admitted guilt. Prison farm staff were also ordered to avoid using isolation cells like “the hole” and told to build 20 new individual cells¹²⁸.

Despite these known deaths, we were unable to obtain official records listing either deaths or burials at the site. We searched several archives, and sent Georgia Open Records Act (GORA) requests to the Police Department, Department of Corrections, and Atlanta City Council. The Police Department told us the records would be in the custody of the Department of Corrections. However, the Department of Corrections told us that they are not and were never the custodians of such records. The Atlanta City Council sent us the Jillian Wootten history and connected us with a historian who may be able to help, and who we are still in contact with for further research after this piece is published. Serena McCracken of the Atlanta History Center told us there’s a possibility such records simply do not exist — that either they never were kept in the first place due to the laws at the time, or they were destroyed at some point, either due to negligence or an expiring period of retention. There is also the possibility that these records do exist and we simply have not found them. They could have been misfiled, or we could still be asking the wrong agency, or they could be sitting in a box of mildewing records, still on the land today, as so many other records were when the City finally shut the site down¹⁰⁹ — many of which are now lost forever in the ensuing fires and other ravages of time.

In the Georgia Archives file on the Prison Farm, we did find a memo describing procedures for the death of inmates. The memo says that upon a prisoner’s death, their nearest of kin should be notified. If the body is not claimed, “then the body shall be given a pauper’s burial not to exceed \$50.00.”¹¹⁰ Such burials currently don’t always include a headstone, but rather a marker or burial flag. These could easily erode over time in an older, neglected cemetery.

But furthermore, not all unmarked graves on the site necessarily exist within a traditional plot. According to Scott Petersen, who has collected folk stories and oral histories about the land for over 20 years, there is another plot next to an old oak tree and a sunken-in structure that was once used to shade the warden during lynchings. This would, of course, not be legal, but as we will see, legality does not always dictate the behaviors of the Prison Farm wardens, and there are records of cases of “runaways” at another prison farm that were later discovered to have been killed and buried on site¹¹¹. As such, we do not find these claims to be outside the bounds of possibility, and if anything are highly likely.

There are also many similarities between the conditions at the Prison Farm and those of the Brandon Indian Residential School that would lead to the need to quickly bury many bodies without necessarily keeping tight records. Kathryn Nichols’ thesis details a history of airborne diseases aggravated by factors such as poor sanitation and ventilation; lack of medical attention; malnutrition; violence and abuse; overwork and

accidents; and harsh punishment of runaways¹¹². All of which are also seen throughout the Prison Farm's history.

While we do not want to draw too tight a comparison between the Prison Farm and other places and events, it is worth looking at these other similar situations as something that shows that the question of unmarked graves is not unfounded nor uncharacteristic of the institutions of the time.

Conditions on the Prison Farm

Though leadership changed hands often over the course of the prison farm's time, and each change of hands was said to be the dawn of a new, better era, conditions remained bleak throughout. Archival research shows that life on the farm was subject to hard labor, long days, harsh punishments, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and constantly lacking healthcare.

Labor and Punishment

As we've already seen, one of the initial motivations for running a city prison farm was to save money on the project of incarceration, or perhaps even generate money. This remained the case throughout, though exactly how well it performed at that was often questioned. This was not a new concept in Atlanta, though. Around the time of its incorporation in the mid 19th Century, the City of Atlanta's population was around 1/5 slaves¹¹³ City Hall itself, along with many other iconic buildings and roads, was built using convict lease labor from the Chattahoochee Brick Works, notorious for its brutal conditions and owned by a former Atlanta mayor¹¹⁴.

The city prison farm produced various crops, livestock, and dairy, but it also provided workers for other city projects. In 1946, Superintendent Gibson bragged that he was cutting the city prison food budget in half, as well as "furnishing the city 11,961 man-days of work on city streets by prisoners" within a six month period. "When you consider that the City has to pay from \$5 to \$7 a day for hired labor, I think we're really saving them some money."¹¹⁵ In 1939 they began saving further money on incarceration by getting "the women prisoners to make the new uniforms," adding that "the city can buy better material because the labor is free."¹¹⁶ They attempted to incentivize overtime work by offering "extra credit for each hour of overtime worked," for reduced sentences¹¹⁷.

The prisoners were forced to build at least some of their own cages, as well. In 1944, one of the older prison buildings was designated for use as a hospital for people with venereal diseases. This meant that prisoners

would need a new building, and they built it themselves: "Most of the work was done with prison labor, with the city providing the materials."¹¹⁸ They were also responsible for the cleaning and maintenance of the buildings in order to pass health inspection. According to an Atlanta Constitution article, "The dormitory, scrubbed daily by men and women whose drunkenness and traffic violations place them behind a mop or tractor for an average 15-day stay, won a 94 rating"¹¹⁹. In 1958, prisoners were even made to rescue a guard's furniture from a fire¹²⁰. By the 1970s, the farm "provided more than half the food and dairy products for inmates in city detention centers." By the 1980s, the prison farm had stopped growing crops, but still provided "42 percent of the pork and beef eaten by the prisoners, both at the farm and at the city jail."¹²¹



This work heavily subsidized city operations and was considered crucial. H. H. Gibson, the head of the prison farm in 1945, said, "idleness is the root of all evil in prison management. To be completely exempt from work, a prisoner should be minus both arms and both legs." This same piece accepts Gibson's claim that he "took care to see that guards did not overwork prisoners" and that "guards are not permitted to strike or even curse prisoners."¹²² This would of course prove untrue.

White guards were known to send Black women to a less-occupied area, supposedly to do extra work, but upon arrival the prisoners would be raped by the guards. If they refused, they were "given a hard way to go." These same guards had the power to assign extra work to them. This was supposed to have been fixed several years earlier with the hiring of a Black woman guard, but she "was only a matron in name. The white guards